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SUBJECT: SAUDI JOURNALISTS ON PRESIDENT'S AL-ARABIYA INTERVIEW

REF: STATE 7500

¶1. PAS Riyadh spoke with six Saudi journalists and editors today on popular reaction to the POTUS interview with Al-Arabiya. All of those contacted said that highlights of the interview were spreading widely on the street, and that the response was overwhelmingly positive. One journalist who also teaches at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah said that "he could definitely sense people's optimism," and a managing editor and journalist of internationally-distributed Al Hayat-which tends more than other Saudi media to be critical of US policy vis-`-vis Israel and the Palestinians-both evinced profound surprise and gratification that the President noted his experience with and familial connections to the Muslim world, saying that the interview went a long way toward "encouraging and reassuring people" that the US was serious about Mideast peace. As noted in a previous message, the political editor of leading Saudi Arabic daily Okaz told us that reaction from his contacts has been "astonishingly positive."

¶2. Although editorial commentary has yet to appear, reportage in the Saudi print media was front page news today in all but internationally-distributed ASharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat. Despite the comments of the Saudi Al-Hayat staff noted above, the paper itself had a terse, two-paragraph report on the interview on page 34 of its Saudi edition that noted that the White House chose Al-Arabiya for the interview "among all the Arab and Muslim television stations in the world." We believe this cryptic comment reflects local and Arab-world criticism of the Saudi-owned satellite station as exhibiting "a pro-Israel bias" during its coverage of the Gaza invasion, in which it consistently referred to Palestinian civilian casualties as being "killed" instead of "martyred." (Our contacts have told us that Saudi religious conservatives routinely refer to Al-Arabiya as "Al-Abreiyah"-Hebrew, a moniker that gained some popular traction here as popular anger over the destruction of Gaza mounted before the cease-fire.)

¶3. Comment: It is clear that our contacts in the Saudi media and their extended network were surprised and disarmed by the President's remarks. Recent op/eds have struck a largely negative or admonishing tone towards the US on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, warning that only real change in policy, not words, will bring peace to the region. While we expect some of that hedging to reassert itself in commentary over the next few days, it is evident that on the emotional level (which is where most Saudis live most of the time) the President's remarks have generated renewed hope and interest in US leadership in a way that would have been unthinkable just a few days ago. End comment.

¶4. Coverage of the POTUS interview by media:

Al-Riyadh: Front page wire story and local reporting under headline "Obama comments on Arab peace initiative: 'new partnership with Arab world without conditions.'" Article features substantial portions of the interview inside the paper. In an SPA article Prince Saud al-Faisal is the only commentator on the interview.

Al-Watan: Front page AFP coverage is of Saud al-Faisal's comments

on the interview. Pg. 5 headline (1/4 page story): "Obama: 'Americans are not the enemy of Arabs and we have made mistakes sometimes and are not perfect.'" Subheading: "Washington is ready to extend a hand to Iran if it becomes more flexible." Opening paragraph says that the new president is "extending a hand to the Muslim world" and threatening that his administration will "uproot terrorist organizations."

ASharq Al-Awsat: Coverage appears on pg. 5, after news about Mitchell's visit on pg. 4. Top heading: "Obama says to Arab world 'we have made some mistakes ... but Americans are not your enemy,'" with sub heading: "Saudi al-Faisal confirms that Arabs will not have any reservations with engaging in productive dialogue about the peace initiative." The article is brief, and connects the interview with Mitchell's visit, noting that Obama speaks to Arab world on the eve of Mitchell's visit.

Al-Medina: Front page; short AFP article: "Obama: 'King Abdullah's Initiative takes great courage.'" Article continues on pg. 20, and features a picture of Obama and Hillary. The Article quotes Obama's interview portions on engaging Iran; his positive approach to the Muslim world, and how he will continue to fight terrorism.

Al-Eqtisadiah: Front page wire story under headline, "Obama: 'America's dependence on external oil exposes her to danger.'" Story continues on pg. 9 with a picture of Obama and Biden under same headline. A quarter-page article focused on his energy plan.

Okaz: Reuters story headline (only): "Obama: 'King Abdullah's peace initiative will help restore peace in the Middle East.'" Coverage continues on pg. 17 with a short article on Obama speech (with a few quotes) and a fact sheet on King Abdullah's "Arab initiative." Al-Jazeera: Front page wire story features picture of Obama and King Abdullah under the headline "Obama announcing attempts to revisit peace in the region: 'King Abdullah's peace initiative took great courage.'" The accompanying article is short and positive, noting Obama singing the praises of King Abdullah.

Arab News: Front page and continues internally under the headline "US is not enemy of Muslims: Obama"

Saudi Gazette: Front page coverage under the headline "We are not your enemy, says Obama to Muslims." A full transcript of the interview appears internally.

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